



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO
Historical Resources Board

DATE ISSUED: October 14, 2003 REPORT NO. P-03-288

ATTENTION: Historical Resources Board
Agenda of October 23, 2003

SUBJECT: **Item 13 - Coronado Belt Line (LDR 40-0378)**

APPLICANT: City of San Diego/Metropolitan Transit Development Board

LOCATION: Within the Area of Potential Effect for the Bayshore Bikeway Project, LDR 40-0378, extending 1.5 miles southeasterly of the intersection of Palomar Street and Bay Blvd., Otay Mesa/Nestor Community, Council District 8

DESCRIPTION: Consider the designation of a segment of the Coronado Belt Line as a Historical Resource Site

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Note and file.

BACKGROUND

This item is being brought before the Historical Resources Board in conjunction with the proposed Bayshore Bikeway project which would modify a structure of 45 years or more under San Diego Municipal Code Section 143.0212. A historical report was prepared by the office of Marie Burke Lia, attorney at law, summarizing the various historical evaluations that have been prepared for this resource over the past nine years and concluding that the resource is not historically significant.



ANALYSIS

Staff concurs that the resource is not historically significant. The first section below provides the background of the historical evaluations, followed in the next section by an analysis based on the HRB Criteria.

Previous Evaluations

The initial historical study was completed by Gregory King of Caltrans in 1994 for a Section 106 evaluation of the Bayshore Bikeway project. That study analyzed the resource's potential eligibility to the National Register of Historic Places and concluded that the resource is not eligible. The State Office of Historic Preservation (SHPO) concurred with the findings in that report. In April 2001, Dr. Alex Bevil prepared a historical study on behalf of Save Our Heritage Organization (SOHO) to list the resource on the California Register. In November 2001, Dr. Karen Weitze was retained to review the two apparently conflicting studies. Dr. Weitze's conclusion was that the resource is not eligible for the National Register or the California Register. The California Register request, along with a SHPO staff report that recommended the resource not be listed on the California Register, was considered by the State Historical Resources Commission (SHRC) in February 2002. However, the SHRC decided to list the resource on the California Register, and SHPO staff followed up with findings for the action in May 2002.

A request for a re-determination was submitted to SHPO by a group of various entities including the City of San Diego soon after the adoption of the findings in May. In October 2002 Dr. Bevil, acting on behalf of SOHO, submitted to SHPO a rebuttal report in opposition to the re-consideration. SHPO staff again recommended that the SHRC not list the resource on the California Register. At the SHRC meeting in November 2002, the Commission determined that, based on new information, the resource is ineligible for the California Register.

Currently, the Bayshore Bikeway project is in the environmental review process. Thus, an evaluation of the historical significance is required, and the reports are being forwarded to the HRB for a determination on historical significance at the local level. Dr. Bevil's evaluation found the resource eligible under criteria for community history and engineering techniques. The appropriate evaluation under HRB Criteria would relate to HRB Criteria A (Community History, Cultural Landscape) and C (Type of Construction).

HRB Criteria

CRITERION A - Exemplifies or reflects special elements of the City's, a community's or a neighborhood's historical, archaeological, cultural, social, economic, political, aesthetic, engineering, landscaping or architectural development.

The original Coronado Belt Line was an independent short line railroad built in 1888. The line was one of 20 in the area by the turn of the 20th century, three of which, including this one, served areas south of San Diego. The line was built to transport materials and passengers to Coronado when the Hotel Del Coronado was being built and in early tourist days. The

importance of the line to Coronado is well documented, although the line is no longer intact in Coronado. The line was used for passengers on the steam line until 1896. There is evidence that passenger service continued on the line from San Diego south, even to Tijuana through a connection to other rail lines. The line was later used primarily to transport freight and **commodities**, including produce, sand, gravel and salt, as well as potash and military material for the shortlived Hercules Powder Plant in Chula Vista, North Island Naval Air Station in Coronado and Rohr Aircraft Company in Chula Vista, respectively.

In 1908, Spreckels had merged the Belt Line with its competitor, the National City and Otay Railway (NC&O). In 1917, the Belt Line was absorbed by the San Diego and Arizona Railway Company (SD&A), ostensibly owned by Spreckels. However, the Southern Pacific Railroad controlled the SD&A, and in 1933, the Spreckels family sold all its interest in the railway to Southern Pacific and the line became a subsidiary known as the San Diego and Arizona Eastern Railway Company (SD&AE). Therefore, after 1917, and arguably since Spreckels merged the Belt Line with its competitor the NC&O in 1908, the line was no longer an independent short line serving purely local needs. Thus, an argument can be made that there are two potential eras of significance: 1888 to 1917 when it was an independent short line, and 1917 to approximately 1950 when it was part of the larger railroad conglomerate.

For the first era of significance, the importance of the line is clearly associated with the City of Coronado, and not as clearly with San Diego. Any significance to San Diego during this time period appears to be based on transport of commodities and limited passengers. The most clear commodity and potential association would be with the transport of salt from the Salt Works. However, the most critical fabric of the Salt Works would appear to be the salt ponds, **berms**, and the equipment to dredge and refine the salt. Transporting the salt from the site had to occur just like any other commodity from any other plant. **Staff's** position based on the information provided is that the means to complete that transport is not critical in understanding the significance of the Salt Works.

The railway was not the only means of transporting salt off-site. The three companies/entities mentioned above - Hercules, North Island Naval Air Station, and Rohr - had wharfs, landing ramps and roads for ship and truck transport. The Hercules plant, station and spur lines have all been demolished so there is no longer any association linking the line to the plant. The line is no longer extant in Coronado at the Naval Air Station. The transport of the standard materials to and from the plants did not contribute strategically to the war efforts for WWI and WWII. In addition, the associations are either gone, or the plant locations are outside of the City of San Diego's boundaries.

Originally 20.3 miles in length, only about 7.5 miles of the Belt Line remains today. Both the point of origin (5th and L in San Diego) and the terminus (ferry wharf in Coronado) sections are gone. While the remnants obviously convey the fact that they were a railroad line, the association with the original historical significance suffers from a loss of integrity because what remains is only a remnant in the middle of the overall line. An observer today could not tell whether it was an independent line, a spur line or a branch line of a larger rail entity, or what was the purpose or overall significance of the line. A resource's significance is its ability to convey its "story", and this railway's story is no longer clear by simply observing what is left of the line.

Therefore, based on a lack of evidence indicating the importance of the line to San Diego's history, and the resource's lack of integrity because so much of the line is gone, staff is unable to support designation under HRB CRITERION A (Community History, Cultural Landscape) at this time.

CRITERION C - Embodies distinctive characteristics of a style, type, period or method of construction or is a valuable example of the use of natural materials or craftsmanship.

The original line was built in 1888. According to the report, the flood of 1916 destroyed much of the line and the owner at that time could not afford to re-build significant portions of the line. The line in the downtown portion of San Diego was removed by about 1919 and the line was re-routed to connect with the San Diego Electric Railway Company line. Over time, as is typical of railways, original materials were changed out including ties, rails, and trestle components, etc. Since the recycling of materials was common, it is unclear whether the extant older components are original to the line or were recycled from other lines within the network. Given the flood of 1916 destroyed much of the line, much of the materials could date from the later potential era of significance of 1917 through 1950.

The critical fabric of the line is also not just the trestles, ties, rails and signals. At the time the line was fully utilized, there were also supporting structures including depots and ancillary buildings and structures as well as the original rail cars themselves. None of these structures exist today according to the reports, and the occasional historic railway trips on the line use historic rail cars from other lines. To state that the remnant ties, rails and trestles are distinctive characteristics of the railroad type of construction without the depots and other supporting structures is similar to stating that a house with its wood framing and wood siding is significant simply because those materials still exist. For the railway line to be significant, there needs to exist enough of the materials, objects and structures to make the resource representative of the type. In this case, the evidence does not indicate that there is enough of the materials and objects to convey the type of resource. Moreover, the significance of the railway is not in any superior engineering design. The Belt Line was of typical construction standards over a relatively flat area of land that did not require any special technologically advanced design.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

While not under consideration at this time, the project which has generated the need for the HRB to consider potential historicity is the Bayshore Bikeway Project. This project will provide a missing link between sections of off-street bikeways. Currently, a segment of the bikeway in Imperial Beach goes from an off-street bikeway onto the road. This project would create an off-road link to provide a safer bikeway. The link would extend through the Western Salt Works land and south to the Imperial Beach section of the bikeway. Through a section of the Salt Works land, the path would follow a haul road and would not affect the existing rail lines. Where the haul road meets the Otay River, the bikeway would merge with the rail lines north of the first trestle. The ties and rails on the berm would be removed to create the bikeway at the necessary width. According to the applicant, the bikeway cannot move to one side or another because of the narrow easement that is allowed within the natural preserve area that the bikeway travels

through at this point. The two trestles would remain, but the ties and rails would be removed and a concrete platform laid on the trestles with side rails to create the bikeway. On the other side of the trestles, the ties and rails would be removed.

CONCLUSION

Based on the information submitted and staff's own field check, it is recommended that the HRB note and file the historical evaluation of the Coronado Belt Line.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Teri Delcamp". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "T" and "D".

Teri Delcamp
Senior Planner/Historian

TD/bh

Attachment: Applicant's Historical Report, Volumes I and II, under separate cover